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ABSTRACT

Loneliness has been viewed as a consequence of situational and/or environmental factors. Previous research has suggested that urban vs. rural people, less vs. more religiously-oriented people, and housewives not employed outside the home experience the greatest sense of isolation and loneliness. To test this hypothesis, data were collected from 115 white middle-class adult married women. Assessment focussed on loneliness (UCLA Loneliness Scale), religiosity and spiritual well-being (a measure of existential well-being), situational factors such as living environment and employment status, and personal factors such as self esteem and interpersonal skills. Three subject groups were sampled to obtain data on urban vs. rural environment (San Francisco and Santa Barbara, CA, and Moscow, ID). Findings, though briefly elaborated, are surprising in that they do not support the generally-supported hypotheses that urban living fosters loneliness nor that housewives are more lonely than employed women. Urban living does apparently relate inversely to religiosity or spiritual well-being, with city living seen as a detriment to religious commitment and life satisfaction. Taken as a whole, the data suggest that the degree of loneliness/well-being is not directly affected by general environmental-situational factors, but may be related to personal attributes such as self esteem and personal social skills. (CKJ)

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Loneliness and Spiritual Well-Being as Functions of Living Environment and Professional Status in Adult Women[1]

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Our research was designed to assess the relationship between loneliness and spiritual well-being, with both of these as functions of one's living environment (e.g., urban versus rural) and employment status (professional versus unemployed) in adult married women. In addition, the relation between these variables and other personal and social variables (e.g., self esteem, perceived social skill) was assessed. First we will develop the rationale for employing each variable, and for their hypothesized relationship. Presentation and discussion of our data (which yielded some surprises) will follow.

Gordon (1976, pp. 15-16) has aptly pointed out:

> What was once a philosophical problem spoken of mainly by poets and prophets, has now become an almost permanent condition for millions of Americans. Knowing no limits of class, race, or age, loneliness is today a great leveler, a new American tradition.

The penetrating truth of this statement becomes apparent upon examining relevant data. For example, one survey found that 26% of the people questioned had felt very lonely or interpersonally remote at some point during the preceding few weeks (Bradburn, 1969). Another national sample, surveyed by telephone rather than face-to-face, indicated that 11% experienced extreme

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loneliness during the week prior to the call (Maisel, 1969). More recent data (Shaver & Freedman, 1976), collected as part of a Psychology Today survey on happiness, indicated that a full 40% say they "often feel lonely." Depending upon the representativeness of these samples and the accuracy of these proportions, these figures extrapolate to somewhere between 20 and 80 million people in America alone.

Those who have talked about loneliness have presented it as a consequence of at least two kinds of factors: one situational and environmental and the other personal. Environmental causes are thought to include such things as urbanization. For example, Moustakas (1961) says that:

> Change from rural to urban living, with emphasis on indispensable services of others, man increasingly competitive, exploitive, status conscious, and suspicious of his neighbor....the separation of self from others and from nature constitutes the primary condition of loneliness anxiety in modern (i.e., urban) societies. The unhappiness, misery, fakery, pretense, the surface meetings, the failure to find genuine human contact often result in a fear and dread of loneliness. (p. 26)

Reasoning from such commentary leads to the hypothesis that, though people who live in America's large cities are surrounded by more people, there is actually less contact of a close nature, and hence more loneliness in them as compared to people who live in rural environments. In the latter case, there would be fewer people, but more intimacy, and consequently less loneliness, between them. Our research was designed to explore this question.

Another situational variable thought to be important, especially in the

case of women, is employment status. Housewives are almost always described as more lonely than working women. Typical of this view is a statement by Ira Tanner in Loneliness: The Fear of Love (1973);

> The housewife experiences a...situational type of loneliness...her sources of love and attention are limited, being frequently confined to those within her home, and if her basic attention needs are not satisfied there, she will have no other outlet. (p. 18)

This statement reflects a widely held view, at least among psychologists. Yet, to date there have been no adequate empirical tests of this hypothesis.

Spiritual Well-Being. The other way that loneliness may be characterized is as a function of personal variables, instead of as aspects of the situation or environment. There are many personal characteristics that could conceivably effect loneliness. But, since feelings of loneliness have often been expressed in existential or spiritual terms (e.g., existential loneliness), especially by existential and religious writers, we focused our attention on spiritual and existential well-being and their possible relationship to loneliness.

Rationale. Thus, in our research we wanted to find out (1) whether living environment would affect loneliness and spiritual and existential well-being, (2) whether employment status would affect loneliness and spiritual well-being, and (3) how loneliness and the well-being measures would relate to each other. Note that the first two questions focus on situational and environmental determinants of loneliness, while the third focuses on personal-dispositional ones.

In addition to these major questions, a variety of subsidiary questions

were explored. These included the relation between the previously discussed variables and such things as self-esteem, perceived social skill, feelings of being appreciated, etc.

Method

Data were collected from 115 middle-class adult, married women. In order to control for race and socio-economic status, all subjects were white, and came from housing areas with media income levels of approximately $11,000. Only homes or duplexes were used in order to eliminate the extraneous variables (e.g., excess mobility) that might ensue with apartment dwellers.

The assessment device was an anonymous questionnaire filled out by volunteers upon being approached by a college coed dressed in attractive looking casual wear. This questionnaire contained the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1977), a measure of spiritual and existential well-being (Ellison & Paloutzian, 1977), and a variety of items assessing the variables of subsidiary interest.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale contains 20 items scored on a 4-point scale from "Often" to "Never." Sample items are: "I cannot tolerate being so alone"; "I lack companionship"; "I feel left out"; "I feel completely alone"; "I feel isolated from others."

The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Table 1) developed upon the foundational work of Moberg (1977a, 1977b), consisted of nine statements designed specifically to assess religious well-being. Each of these items had a reference to God. An additional six statements were designed to measure existential well-being. They made no mention of God, but dealt with such things as meaning in life, purpose, direction, and satisfaction. The religious and existential sub-scales were combined into an overall spiritual well-being scale. Response options fell on a 6-point scale (strongly agree-strongly

disagree). A factor analysis of the total 15 items largely supported this construction of the Scale (Ellison & Paloutzian, 1977).

Urban versus rural living environment was varied by collecting data in a large, congested city (San Francisco), a medium sized city of 100,000 (Santa Barbara, CA), and a small rural town of 15,000 (Moscow, ID). (A manipulation check item from our analysis indicated that San Francisco residents did perceive their living environment as "too big" ($p < .003$) compared to residents of the medium and small sized towns.) Employment status was varied by collecting data from either full-time housewives or full-time professional working women (e.g., secretary). Data were collected from women of both employment statuses across the three locations, yielding a 3 x 2 design for which living environment and employment status could be treated as independent variables in analyses of variance.

Results and Discussion

Overall. The overall findings were that loneliness was not affected by city size or employment status, spiritual and existential well-being declined for women living in the large, urban city, and loneliness and positive spiritual well-being were negatively related. More specifically:

Loneliness. The UCLA Loneliness Scale scores were submitted to a 3 x 2 ANOVA, which yielded no significant effects. These findings are intriguing because they are so inconsistent with popular opinion as well as the theorizing reviewed previously. First, regarding the general living environment variable, our data do not support the hypothesis that urban living fosters more loneliness than other environments. There are some data by other researchers that are consistent with our results. For example, one study found that alienation was not related to population density (Ducharme, 1975).

Our findings may make more sense if we consider that whether one lives in an urban or rural area one can still function only within a limited circle of relationships. In addition, one's personal state as well as the quality of more immediate and significant relationships may determine loneliness. For example, perception of one's neighborhood as cohesive was negatively associated with loneliness across the general environments ($r = -.35$, $p < .001$); whether the women perceived their husbands as understanding and compatible also tended to be less lonely ($r = -.34$, $p < .001$; $r = -.29$, $p < .002$), while those who indicated they'd feel like a more complete person if they were single were more often lonely ($r = -.34$, $p < .001$).

Second, the other situational variable had no effect on loneliness. Housewives were <u>not</u> more lonely than employed women. Besides being contrary to popular opinion and psychological theorizing, it is exactly opposite to prior data obtained by Shaver and Freedman (1976). Their findings were that 44% of the housewives reported feeling lonely, whereas only 26% of the employed wives did. Consistent with our findings, however, is the finding by Miller (1975) that professionalism was <u>not</u> significantly related to alienation. Perhaps the discrepancy between our findings and the Shaver-Freedman (1976) finding can be attributed to subject sample (<u>Psychology Today</u> readers are probably a non-representative sample of the whole population), assessment procedure (their yes-no procedure versus the UCLA Loneliness Scale), or the mathematical form of the dependent variable (percentages versus scaled scores).

It may be that housewives today have chosen to be at home, rather than be forced there by society or out of necessity. Consequently, they may believe that it fulfills them, and view it much as a professional woman views her job. Another possibility is that working women may have fewer

children, thereby decreasing her chances of intimate contacts to possibly only her husband. Since working relationships are often surface ones, developed for economic reasons, they may not fulfill deeper needs. Consistent with this view is our finding that housewives were less likely to feel lonely when not appreciated than working women ($p < .004$). That is, since working women may be more dependent upon surface relationships, when these relationships are perceived to be harmed by lack of appreciation, the surface contact is lost and loneliness follows. But in a deeper marriage relationship, though there may be some lack of appreciation, due to the stability of the relationship, loneliness may not follow because she knows that he is still really "there."

A recent evaluation of six national surveys by Wright (1978) parallels and affirms our findings. He offers another interpretation, suggesting that both professional and housewife roles have costs and benefits attached to them. The net effect is that though the kinds of satisfaction associated eith each role differ, there are no consistent, substantial, or statistically significant differences in reported happiness and life satisfaction.

Spiritual Well-Being. The ANOVA's of the spiritual well-being scores indicated that living in the urban environment was associated with significantly lower religious well-being ($p < .05$), existential well-being ($p < .04$), and total spiritual well-being ($p < .03$). Apparently urban living has a detrimental effect on one's religious commitments and on satisfaction and direction in life. Alternately, the urban life-style could draw people low in religious well-being and life satisfaction and direction.

Loneliness--Well-Being Relationships. UCLA Loneliness Scale scores were significantly inversely correlated with religious well-being ($r = -.48$, $p < .001$), existential well-being ($r = -.57$, $p < .001$), and total spiritual well-being ($r = -.55$, $p < .001$).

The set of findings reviewed so far, when interpreted as a whole unit, suggest that loneliness is not caused by general environmental-situational factors such as crowded cities and being "stuck" at home in the housewife role. The loneliness/well-being relations suggest an underlying communality in loneliness and lowered well-being perhaps captured in the common description of the experience of loneliness as one of emptiness. This may in turn be a function of the quality of more limited interpersonal experiences found in one's neighborhood and marriage. Alternatively, loneliness and lack of spiritual well-being could be part of an integrated cluster of personal attributes which covary with other qualities such as shyness, low self-esteem, personal skill at initmate relationships, etc.

This last notion is supported by some of our subsidiary data analyses. For example, the loneliness scale correlated -.79 ($p < .001$) with self-esteem, and -.61 ($p < .001$) with social skill; self-esteem correlated +.58 ($p < .001$) with social skills; spiritual well-being correlated +.43 ($p < .001$) with self-esteem and +.30 ($p < .001$) with social skills; self-esteem was not significantly affected by living environment or professional status. All in all, the data imply that loneliness is a function of restricted interactional and dispositional factors, rather than general situational ones. Research by Vasquez (1975) indicating that people with high internal control are less lonely also supports this view.

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Footnotes

1. Our thanks to Cathy Gast, Tracy Walters, Diane Roper, and Jill Hinkle (Westmont College), Patty Ward and Amy Jordan (University of Idaho) for their assistance in data collection and analysis.
2. The assumption was made that the employed women also represented a middle-class income level, though no combined husband/wife income figures were available.